



MINSTREL SHOW; **OR, THE LYNCHING OF WILLIAM BROWN**

**AN ORIGINAL PLAY
BY MAX SPARBER**

originally produced by the blue barn
theatre, omaha, nebraska, on location
at the douglas county courthouse,
the actual site of the lynching

Minstrel Show; Or, The Lynching of William Brown was originally produced by Max Sparber and Hughston Walkinshaw at the Blue Barn Theatre in March of 1998. This production was directed by Laura Partridge and starred Jonathan Wilson and David Lewis. The script may be freely copied and distributed, but may not be sold or altered in any way. Any production of this play must be cleared with Mr. Max Sparber.

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WITNESSES

*Two African-American performers take the stage dressed in rags and blackface.
They address the audience.*

Yas-Yas: Y'all want us to tell it.

Sho-Nuff: Tell it.

Yas-Yas: This is why y'all has brought us to this place.

Sho-Nuff: To tell it.

Yas-Yas: This terrible place where it done happened.

Sho-Nuff: This place.

Yas-Yas: The Douglas County Courthouse.

Sho-Nuff: Yas.

Yas-Yas: Maybe we don't want to tell it.

Sho-Nuff: Maybe.

Yas-Yas: Maybe we don't ever want to tell it.

Sho-Nuff: Put it behind us.

Yas-Yas: Look around you. This place a ruin.

Sho-Nuff: Not a bit of wood ain't burned black.

Yas-Yas: We was in this building.

Sho-Nuff: Oh, we was in it.

Yas-Yas: And it burned.

Sho-Nuff: Burned near to the ground!

Yas-Yas: And we saw a man hanged here.

Sho-Nuff: We seen it.

Yas-Yas: So we witnesses.

Sho-Nuff: What is we?

Yas-Yas: Witnesses.

Sho-Nuff: I guess we is.

Yas-Yas: So we could tell it.

Sho-Nuff: Tell it.

Yas-Yas: We could teach it.

Sho-Nuff: Teach!

Yas-Yas: But do we dare?

Sho-Nuff: That's the question, sho' nuff. That is the question.

Yas-Yas: Y'all seem awful eager to hear the story.

Sho-Nuff: Eager, yas.

Yas-Yas: Desperate, almost.

Sho-Nuff: Desperate. I would say eager.

Yas-Yas: Dragging us back to the scene of the deed in these old rags.

Sho-Nuff: Aw, my suit's okay.

Yas-Yas: And these battered hats.

Sho-Nuff: I think my hat makes me look fine.

Yas-Yas: And this black cork on our face.

Sho-Nuff: That there might take some explaining.

Yas-Yas: Explain it.

Sho-Nuff: We ain't the first to use blackface.

Yas-Yas: No.

Sho-Nuff: We didn't think it up.

Yas-Yas: No.

Sho-Nuff: It started with white folks.

Yas-Yas: White folks what intended to impersonate Negroes.

Sho-Nuff: They put a bit of soot on their face, or shoe polish, or cork.

Yas-Yas: Soon they look like a regular Negro.

Sho-Nuff: They travel here and there, singing and dancing.

Yas-Yas: Negro songs and dances.

Sho-Nuff: That's the way it happens.

Yas-Yas: And soon enough, that's the way people want it to happen. Folks get to wanting the blackface.

Sho-Nuff: Sho'.

Yas-Yas: Even if the face is black to begin with.

Sho-Nuff: So we gots us an act.

Yas-Yas: An act, yas.

Sho-Nuff: What shows, I would say, tableaux.

Yas-Yas: Tableaux, yas. I like that word.

Sho-Nuff: Of Negro life.

Yas-Yas: Tableaux of Negro life. We could say that. You would say we gots us a ...

Both: Coon show.

Yas-Yas: A minstrel act. But perhaps I's telling y'all — what would you say?

Sho-Nuff: What y'all already know.

Yas-Yas: Yas, as it was early today we was in the middle of a performance. We was roused to meet with you.

Sho-Nuff: Sho!

Yas-Yas: Roused by a half dozen constables.

Sho-Nuff: Oh, sho'!

Yas-Yas: Constables what took us by our arms through the streets of Omaha.

Sho-Nuff: Omaha.

Yas-Yas: In our raggedy old clothes.

Sho-Nuff: Raggedy!

Yas-Yas: And battered old hats.

Sho-Nuff: Battered!

Yas-Yas: And cork blackened faces.

Sho-Nuff: Blackened!

Yas-Yas: And made to sit and wait for more than an hour.

Sho-Nuff: Maybe two hour!

Yas-Yas: To tell a story what we're not sure we want to tell.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff!

Yas-Yas: So you can imagine we's a little worried about why we's here.

Sho-Nuff: Sitting there, waiting and wondering, we get nervous.

Yas-Yas: This here ad-hoc committee is out to find the truth behind the hanging.

Sho-Nuff: So we's been told.

Yas-Yas: But what if you's out to find out something more.

Sho-Nuff: We dread to think it.

Yas-Yas: We fled into the night.

Sho-Nuff: We took off running.

Yas-Yas: And now we get brought back.

Sho-Nuff: So we sit, we wait, we wonder.

Yas-Yas: Why is we back here? We been arrested once.

Sho-Nuff: We wonder, is we gonna be arrested again?

Yas-Yas: Maybe you want us to sing and dance, to tell you the story.

Sho-Nuff: Maybe.

Yas-Yas: And maybe we gonna dance.

Sho-Nuff: Maybe.

Yas-Yas: But first, we gonna sing.

Sho-Nuff: Why not?

Yas-Yas: Why not indeed. When your constables took us off the stage, we was just opening our mouth to let out a holler.

Sho-Nuff: *(Singing)* Well it's early in the mornin'.

Yas-Yas: It was early in the morning, gentlemen.

Sho-Nuff: *(Singing)* When I rise, Lordy mama.

Yas-Yas: When I rise!

Sho-Nuff: *(Singing)* Well, it's early in the mornin'.

Yas-Yas: Early!

Sho-Nuff: *(Singing)* A-baby, when I rise, well-a, well-a well-a, when I rise, well-a.

Yas-Yas: That's the song! We was singing it, and we was pleasing our audience, and we was earning our daily dollar.

Sho-Nuff: We working men.

Yas-Yas: Yas. We have put us together an act what has received sizable acclaim on both sides of the Missouri river.

Sho-Nuff: But not in Omaha.

Yas-Yas: Omaha, where we can't seem to take the stage without something pulling us off. We can't pull a dime out of this town.

Sho-Nuff: So you want us to be your witnesses.

Yas-Yas: Maybe we don't want to be your witnesses.

Sho-Nuff: Maybe we jes' want to sing.

Yas-Yas: And we can sing all night. We got some pride in the songs we sing. As you can hear, we develop some complex syncopations in our singing. Let us demonstrate:

Both: *(Singing)* Boys the peckerwood's a peckin' on the — on the old schoolhouse door, sugar. Well the peckerwood's a peckin' on the — on the old schoolhouse door, well-a well-a. The peckerwood's a peckin' on the — on the old schoolhouse door, sugar. Well, he pecked so hard, Lordy baby, until his pecker got sore, Lordy baby. Until his pecker got sore, Lordy sugar. Well, he pecks so hard, Lord mama, until his pecker got sore, well-a. Well-a, it's-a, Lordy, Ro — Lordy — Berta. Well, it's Lord (you keep talking) baby. Well it's Lord — Ro — Lordy — Rosie Well, it's, o Lord, gal, well-a.

Yas-Yas: We could go on demonstrating our complex syncopations all night.

Sho-Nuff: And well into the morning.

Yas-Yas: And we will do that unless we are given some kind of indication.

Sho-Nuff: Some sort of confirmation.

Yas-Yas: That we here as witnesses to the lynching of William Brown.

Sho-Nuff: And not as criminals.

Yas-Yas: Yas.

THE ATTACK

- Yas-Yas:** I can tell from the extended silence that you have no intention of honoring our request.
- Sho-Nuff:** No, sir.
- Yas-Yas:** Well, if there can be no agreement ...
- Sho-Nuff:** There can be no story.
- Yas-Yas:** Leaving us in quite an uncomfortable spot. We is here to talk.
- Sho-Nuff:** Sho'.
- Yas-Yas:** But we ain't gonna talk about that black night of September 28, 1919.
- Sho-Nuff:** No.
- Yas-Yas:** So what do we talk about?
- Sho-Nuff:** The act?
- Yas-Yas:** Well, that do seem appropriate. Seeing as we both minstrels, and we gots us an act what has toured to sizable acclaim on both sides of the mighty Missouri River, and both North and South of the Mason Dixon line.
- Sho-Nuff:** We writes our own material.
- Yas-Yas:** Yas we do, don't you know. That is why we always draw enthusiastic responses from our audiences.
- Sho-Nuff:** Enthusiastic.
- Yas-Yas:** They come up after the show and jes' shower us with high praise, sayin':
- Sho-Nuff:** "You sho' do put on a fine act!"
- Yas-Yas:** Yas. Or:
- Sho-Nuff:** "I ain't laughed so much in all my born days."
- Yas-Yas:** Yas, yas. Or:
- Sho-Nuff:** "Ain't no one can sing out a song like you boys."

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas, they flatter us like that. Because our audience is Negro, and they recognize some of themselves in these tableaux of Negro life we put up for them.

Sho-Nuff: We gets us whoops and hollers.

Yas-Yas: Yas.

Sho-Nuff: We gets us some folks doubled over weeping, they's laughing so hard.

Yas-Yas: But not last week.

Sho-Nuff: No. Not last week.

Yas-Yas: That night a week ago, instead of a rain of applause from the audience, we gots us a rain of policemen.

Sho-Nuff: Johnny Laws.

Yas-Yas: We was up in front of a crowd of about twenty, what come to this performing venue what was, uh ...

Sho-Nuff: An old feed store.

Yas-Yas: A feed store once, and then a storefront church.

Sho-Nuff: And now they gots four tables and a long bar for alcohol. So now it is something of a saloon.

Yas-Yas: And you can gets red beans and rice, so it is a restaurant of sorts.

Sho-Nuff: And they keep chickens and a goat in the back, so it is something of a barnyard.

Yas-Yas: It's a performance venue.

Sho-Nuff: A performance venue.

Yas-Yas: We was performing a little act there what we call "The Amen Corner."

Sho-Nuff: "The Amen Corner!"

Yas-Yas: This routine, and variations of it, have been kicking around since the middle of the last century. We writes our own material, but we don't claim it's new.

Sho-Nuff: Naw.

Yas-Yas: And in it, I play a fire and brimstone teacher. I preaches salvation and damnation in a flowery oratory style. Now, we gots us in our churches a section what responds with enthusiasm each time the preacher opens his mouth. They holler out:

Sho-Nuff: “Hallelujah!”

Yas-Yas: And:

Sho-Nuff: “Praise to God!”

Yas-Yas: And more than that:

Sho-Nuff: “Amen, brother! Amen!”

Yas-Yas: Bellowing and hollering like each word from the preacher is manna what has fallen out of the Heavens. But as we say, those what shout “Amen!” the loudest ...

Sho-Nuff: ... Are those what sin the mostest.

Yas-Yas: So while I’s up on stage preachin’ the living gospel.

Sho-Nuff: I’s goin’ down, right into the audience, like this.

Yas-Yas: And up on stage, in my grandest oratory style, I say: “The hand of God it reaches out, chillin’, against those who gots sin in their hearts and it forms itself into a mighty fist.” And while I’s sayin’ this ...

Sho-Nuff: ... I’s reachin’ my hand into the air and forming it into a mighty fist what rises high above the audience. And then I shakes that fist.

Yas-Yas: And then I goes on to preach: “But to the faithful the hand of God it stretches wide open.”

Sho-Nuff: And I stretch my hand wide open and let fly with a pair of dice, what roll up to the stage and bump against the preacher’s podium.

Yas-Yas: But I don’t see this, and I continues to preach, “Ain’t no place in Heaven for the sinner man!”

Sho-Nuff: And I drop to my knees like I’s moved by the spirit, and I grasp at my bones, and I calls out “Amen, brother, amen!” And then I throws my bones again.

Yas-Yas: And I say, “you cannot serve both God and Mammon!”

Sho-Nuff: And I says, “Hallelujah!” and raise me up a thick roll of dollar bills what I gots to gamble with.

Yas-Yas: And I says, “No, there’s no place across the river Jordan by the New Jerusalem for those what have got greed or envy in their hearts.”

Sho-Nuff: And I say, “Praise God, you speaks the truth,” and then I turn to the man next to me and say to him, “I will gamble you for that fur coat what your wife’s got on. I do like that coat!”

Yas-Yas: And I say, “Let us turn to the book of Daniel, where we see those who believe shall be thrown into the furnace but they shall not be consumed, while those with unbelief who want naught but wealth suffer and fall. Let us look in Daniel Chapter four, verse ... uh ...”

Sho-Nuff: And I let’s fly with my bones.

Yas-Yas: “Chapter four, verse, uh, um,”

Sho-Nuff: And I looks to see what my bones done rolled.

Yas-Yas: “Chapter four, verse ...”

Sho-Nuff: “Seven.”

Yas-Yas: “Why yas. Chapter four, verse seven. We see the wicked shall be punished.”

Sho-Nuff: And I have been punished, because I crapped out, and I gots to hand over my fat bankroll to the man with the wife with the fur, and I makes a big production of it, like this:

Yas-Yas: And this always draws thunderous applause from the audience, and stomping of feet, and gales of laughter. But one week ago on this night, it wasn’t no gales of laughter we was hearing.

Sho-Nuff: No sir.

Yas-Yas: It wasn’t thunderous applause.

Sho-Nuff: No, no, no.

Yas-Yas: It wasn’t stomping of feet.

Sho-Nuff: It was screaming.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas. Screaming and cries of mortal agony. We looked out into the audience to see what it was, what was causing the ruckus, and we saw — oh, how many?

Sho-Nuff: A dozen, sho’ nuff. A dozen.

Yas-Yas: A dozen men with bats and wooden planks jes' beating on the Negroes what were seated and trying to enjoy our show. These dozen men had their heads covered, their faces covered up with, uh,

Sho-Nuff: Burlap sacks.

Yas-Yas: Yas, burlap sacks with holes cut out for their eyes, so they could see. They was striking whoever they could strike with a brutality I ain't never seen in all my born days! And in the darkness the brutality took the form of horrible silhouettes —

Sho-Nuff: Horrible!

Yas-Yas: — with distorted heads —

Sho-Nuff: Horrible!

Yas-Yas: — committing horrible acts of violence.

Sho-Nuff: Horrible!

Yas-Yas: Several of these silhouettes ran up to the stage area and climbed onto it aiming to use their bats and planks on our backsides. This condition we viewed — as you can imagine —

Sho-Nuff: Adversely.

Yas-Yas: Yas, so we commenced to —

Sho-Nuff: Run.

Yas-Yas: Run, yas. We commenced to run out the back way and into an alley where they caught us and set to beating us like we was misbehaving dogs. They did this until a policeman blew his whistle and came running down the alley and broke up that brawl.

Sho-Nuff: Oh! Oh!

Yas-Yas: The men in the burlap sacks jes' scattered like dried leaves.

Sho-Nuff: They commenced to run.

Yas-Yas: Leaving us doubled over and bleeding jes' as they would a stuck pig. And this John Law looks at us, and turns us over, and sits us up, and watches the blood from our respective scalps washing the cork off our respective black faces. Finally, he opens his mouth and says:

Sho-Nuff: "Disturbing the peace."

Yas-Yas: Yas, disturbing the peace. And then he says:

Sho-Nuff: “Disorderly conduct.”

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas, disorderly conduct. And then he says,

Sho-Nuff: “I’m gonna take y’all down to the Douglas County Courthouse.”

Yas-Yas: Because, it seems, in Omaha it is a crime if you a Negro to be beaten in the streets. It’s a good thing we wasn’t murdered or we’d probably still be in jail.

Sho-Nuff: Sho’ nuff.

Yas-Yas: So this Johnny Law commenced to march us like prisoners through the streets of Omaha and down to the Douglas County Courthouse, where we stands again now, right here. And as we passed a white folk on our left and a white folk on our right, they gave us such a look like we was something —

Sho-Nuff: Foul.

Yas-Yas: Yas, something foul. And we must have been quite a sight in our ragged clothes and blood coming off us. And as we marched we used the rags on our bodies to wipe off the blood and what remained of our burnt cork make-up.

Sho-Nuff: Some white men rained curses on us.

Yas-Yas: Oh, yes. Some saw us and spat on us. Can you imagine! Walked up to our faces and spat upon us! And the Johnny Law said to us —

Sho-Nuff: “Y’all got yourself the Negro William Brown to thank for this.”

Yas-Yas: Say that again.

Sho-Nuff: “Y’all got yourself the Negro William Brown to thank for this.”

Yas-Yas: In all my born days, I ain’t never heard a man referred to as “The Negro so-and-so,” but I have never heard William Brown referred to without “The Negro” attached to the front of his name, and now his name jes’ don’t sound right on its lone-some.

Sho-Nuff: And it wasn’t the first time we had heard that name.

Yas-Yas: No, it wasn't. We knew this man, the Negro William Brown, as I promise you did every Negro man, woman and child in this fair city. We knew every detail of his story. The Negro William Brown, what supposedly —

Sho-Nuff: Supposedly.

Yas-Yas: — molested a little white girl by the name Agnes Lobeck who was nineteen years of age and a laundry worker. Yas, yas, we knew the details like we was the man' own kin. No one in Omaha wanted to say to us —

Sho-Nuff: "You sho' do put on a fine act."

Yas-Yas: Nossuh. And they didn't say —

Sho-Nuff: "I ain't laughed so much in all my born days."

Yas-Yas: Nossuh. And they didn't say —

Sho-Nuff: "Ain't no one can sing out a song like you boys!"

Yas-Yas: Nossuh. What they did say was —

Sho-Nuff: "They gonna lynch that William Brown."

Yas-Yas: Oh, these was words we did not want to hear. And they said to us —

Sho-Nuff: "Won't be the first time a colored man got hisself hanged in Omaha."

Yas-Yas: You surprised? You surprised us Negro folks talk about that? That was a lynching what occurred thirty years ago in —

Sho-Nuff: 1891.

Yas-Yas: Yas, in 1891, yas. But we talk about it like it happened yesterday. Not a Negro entertainer or cattle driver or train porter passes through Omaha without hearing that in 1891 a black man was hanged from a trolley wire until he was dead.

Sho-Nuff: We hear every detail.

Yas-Yas: Every terrible moment from 30 years ago. Now, some of you look a little surprised like this was the first time you heard this story. Maybe you look surprised because it sounds familiar. Because just now, this year, this week, the population of this fine city Omaha rose up and repeated this awful story with almost every detail —

Sho-Nuff: Intact.

Yas-Yas: Intact, yas. So as we was parading through the streets of Omaha, with folks staring and cursing and spitting, we had this story of the lynching in our heads. We was filled with a cold terror, because we knew what it was that waited for us at the Douglas County Courthouse. Yas we knew.

Sho-Nuff: The Negro William Brown.

Yas-Yas: The Negro William Brown, what was the most hated man in Omaha. The Negro William Brown, the man of the hour. The man they said would be hanged.

WILLIAM BROWN

Yas-Yas: We should pause now.

Sho-Nuff: We should?

Yas-Yas: Yas. We said we wasn't going to talk none about the lynching.

Sho-Nuff: Sho'.

Yas-Yas: And we started talking about the lynching.

Sho-Nuff: Oh, sho' nuff we did!

Yas-Yas: What was we talking about before we got into all that?

Sho-Nuff: The act.

Yas-Yas: The show.

Sho-Nuff: The minstrel show. Uh-huh.

Yas-Yas: Our fine collections of dramatic and comedic performances, with music, what has toured all throughout the south and what, I am proud to say, is breaking new ground in the North.

Sho-Nuff: To sizable acclaim.

Yas-Yas: Yas. Folks do like our act.

Sho-Nuff: Sho'!

Yas-Yas: They like our songs.

Sho-Nuff: That they do.

Yas-Yas: Maybe we should demonstrate what we mean.

Sho-Nuff: Do you think we oughta?

Yas-Yas: Yas. We don't seem to be goin' nowhere.

Sho-Nuff: Sho'.

Yas-Yas: And neither do they.

Sho-Nuff: No, they don't. If I didn't hear the clicking of their stenography machine, I wouldn't think there was no one out there at all.

Yas-Yas: So what is one song, more or less?

Sho-Nuff: A minute of their time.

Yas-Yas: A minute of our time.

Sho-Nuff: We can afford it.

Both: Last year wasn't no good crop year
And everybody knowed it
Grandpa raised a bushel of corn
And some black rascal stole it.
I'm goin' home, son, I'm goin' home.
I'm goin' home, son, I'm goin' home.

Jaybird pulling the turnin' plow
Sparrow pullin' the harrow
You gonna pull it today, big boy
And I'm gonna pull it tomorrow
I'm goin' home, son, I'm goin' home
I'm goin' home, son, I'm goin' home.

Lost my gal the other day
Where do you reckon' I found her?
Way down in the old corn field
Fifteen boys around her
I'm goin' home, big boy, I'm goin' home
I'm goin' home, son, I'm goin' home.

Girl bring me my shotgun
Rifle ain't got no trigger
We goin' down to a party tonight
Might meet another nigger
I'm goin' home, big boy, I'm goin' home
I'm goin' home, son, I'm goin' home
I'm goin' home, big boy, I'm goin' home.

Yas-Yas: You ever hear a song like that? Kind of puzzlin', ain't it? Why, the words don't seem to make no sense at all. It ain't a song we sings all the time, but believe me, if we gots the right audience and we sings this song they will commence to laughing so hard that they will gasp for air and beg for us to stop. Why do you think that is? It's a special kind of song, and it gots a special name.

Sho-Nuff: A yahoo song.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas, a yahoo song. And ain't that a peculiar name? Now I don't want to offend you, gentlemen, so let me — uh — preface my next comments by sayin' that "yahoo" is a disparaging word used by colored folks in Mississippi —

Sho-Nuff: And elsewhere.

Yas-Yas: — to describe white folks. Now, this song is sung as though it were a white man singing. And this is a white man what's had his profits and his woman stole from him by some black rascal, as the song do say. Now, this white man intends on taking his shotgun to shoot that Negro down. Now, ain't that a peculiar subject for a song!

Sho-Nuff: It sho' is!

Yas-Yas: I guarantee you, this is one song you will not hear in a minstrel show what's made up of white men in black face singing their renditions of Negro songs to a white audience.

Sho-Nuff: Nossuh.

Yas-Yas: Indeed, nossuh. This is one song you will not find them on stage, knees bent, eyes bulging, arms thrown out to the audience, singing it to them. They ain't been the right places to learn such a song.

Sho-Nuff: Oh, no.

Yas-Yas: Where is it you think we had to go to learn us such a peculiar song?

Sho-Nuff: We learned it on Parchman Farm.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas. Parchman Farm, what covers forty-six square miles of Mississippi land in the Yazoo Delta and is part of the Mississippi State Penitentiary system. It is a cotton plantation where cotton is growed and sowed and reaped by Negro prisoners what work, as we say, from —

Sho-Nuff: I can't see.

Yas-Yas: — In the morning, to —

Sho-Nuff: I can't see!

Yas-Yas: — At night. It don't take no imagination to figure that we wasn't exactly tourists on Parchman Farm. We was doin' hard time. Me, I gots me three long years picking cotton for my crimes, and what do you think I had done?

Sho-Nuff: Three years! Why, you must have been a house burglar!

Yas-Yas: Nah, I ain't never burgled no house.

Sho-Nuff: Then you must have been putting women out to work on the streets.

Yas-Yas: No, I was never a pimp, and I ain't never worked no whores.

Sho-Nuff: Then I imagine you cut up a man in a razor fight.

Yas-Yas: Nah, I always kept to myself and ain't never raised a hand against another man.

Sho-Nuff: Then what was the thing you done to get yourself a three-year sentence at Parchman?

Yas-Yas: I was a trespasser.

Sho-Nuff: Trespassing! Why, that's a crime in the state of Mississippi!

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas, it is. I foolishly tried to locate the fastest way from here to there by crossin' a big tobacco field.

Sho-Nuff: Three years! Walkin' on the white man's land, you lucky you ain't dead.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas, I know it. And how much time did you spend working at Parchman?

Sho-Nuff: Twelve months.

Yas-Yas: Twelve months!

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff. I ain't no hardened criminal like you. I ain't never done no trespassing.

Yas-Yas: What you done to get youself a year?

Sho-Nuff: I did not surrender the sidewalk to a white man when he wished to pass me and I used abusive language with my arresting officer.

Yas-Yas: You used abusive language?

Sho-Nuff: It was terrible. A woman fainted to hear it.

Yas-Yas: Then hell, son, you lucky you only got youself one year. We seen men there do longer for less. We seen men cut off their toes so as to not work anymore. We seen men drop where they stood, their hearts stopped from exhaustion. We seen men go mad and take to running and be shot in the back. Parchman Farm stinks of two thing: cotton and death, and we seen enough of both. We did our time for our crimes and walked off Parchman together as free men and we knew one more day in Mississippi was gonna be one day too many.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff.

Yas-Yas: So after having our fill of prison and death we comes to Omaha and finds ourselves again in prison. And who do you think we get put in a cell with? Yas, yas, you guessed it.

Sho-Nuff: The man of the hour.

Yas-Yas: The Negro William Brown. We spent the night with him in the cell listening to him holler and shout in pain. You see, despite the testimony of Miss Agnes Lobeck that she was assaulted by this man, the Negro William Brown was, uh, what would you say?

Sho-Nuff: All crippled up.

Yas-Yas: All crippled up, yas. So weak a hard gust of wind would send him sprawling to his knees. He was suffering a debilitating condition what is called, uh —

Sho-Nuff: Rheumatism.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas, rheumatism, causing him to shout out and cry in pain in such a manner that it deprived every single one of the one hundred and twenty one prisoners in this Douglas County Courthouse of a night's sleep. He was weeping and moaning in such a manner:

Sho-Nuff: "Oh, the pain is something awful! I can't stand this awful pain!"

Yas-Yas: And on like that without a moment of quiet, so by the time it was about five in the morning we was, uh, what would you say?

Sho-Nuff: We was about ready to kill the man ourselves.

Yas-Yas: I was going to say we was convinced of the man's innocence.

Sho-Nuff: That too.

Yas-Yas: The Negro William Brown couldn't hardly move his joints swelled up so. If ever he was an assaulter his assaulting days were over, replaced by nights of near excruciating agony. Since with his yellin' we couldn't sleep none we gots to trying to speak with him. There he was, the man of the hour, and we reckoned it was better to have him speaking than weeping. But it turns out the man wasn't exactly, uh —

Sho-Nuff: Talkative.

Yas-Yas: Nossuh. Once we got him off the topic of the pain in his joints and onto the topic of the supposed assault he started shaking and coughing and moaning in terror. Making, if you can believe it, more noise than he had before, sayin':

Sho-Nuff: "What do they want to kill me for?"

Yas-Yas: And:

Sho-Nuff: "I ain't done nothing! I ain't done what they say!"

Yas-Yas: And:

Sho-Nuff: "Can't they see I's crippled!"

Yas-Yas: So this Negro William Brown continued to wailing his innocence loudly and violently to us what already believed him, and come the next morning all we knew about this man William Brown was that he had a pair of lungs on him.

Sho-Nuff: Nothing crippled about his lungs!

Yas-Yas: No, them lungs worked fine. And that's all we can tell you about the Negro William Brown, because he ain't never gonna make no noise no more.

Sho-Nuff: Nossuh.

MORNING

Yas-Yas: We telling it.

Sho-Nuff: What's that?

Yas-Yas: We telling it.

Sho-Nuff: Oh. Shoot.

Yas-Yas: I'm thinking, maybe we should.

Sho-Nuff: What protection we got?

Yas-Yas: None. Except the truth.

Sho-Nuff: Sho', the truth.

Yas-Yas: We know the truth.

Sho-Nuff: We know it.

Yas-Yas: We witnessed it.

Sho-Nuff: Oh, we did that.

Yas-Yas: And we can tell the truth.

Sho-Nuff: Straight from our memories to our mouths.

Yas-Yas: But where do we start with the story?

Sho-Nuff: Lessee ...

Yas-Yas: We in jail.

Sho-Nuff: Sho'.

Yas-Yas: In the cell.

Sho-Nuff: Ah, yas. With William Brown.

Yas-Yas: We couldn't get nothing out of William Brown but for his cries of pain, so soon we turned away from him, to the other prisoners.

Sho-Nuff: We did that.

Yas-Yas: And why? Because other prisoners, hardened criminals all of them, always provide us with some exceptional material for our act.

Sho-Nuff: Our act.

Yas-Yas: Our minstrel act.

Sho-Nuff: That they do.

Yas-Yas: In the form of something we call toasts. Now, I's getting some puzzled responses, as though some of y'all don't know what a toast is.

Sho-Nuff: A toast? It's a bragging thing, a boastful story.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas. Prisoners get to boasting and making up stories in a rhyming manner what is very amusing, and when we get to talking to prisoners we always like to get them on the topic of toasts. We get them to remember what they can, and we incorporate that into our act.

Sho-Nuff: Shall I demonstrate?

Yas-Yas: Demonstrate? Yas. I don't think no-one can fully understand a toast without hearing one.

Sho-Nuff: Sho'.

Yas-Yas: Why don't you give them a sampling of a very old story we know, what is told in many versions.

Sho-Nuff: I will do that.

Yas-Yas: A toast what is called "The Signifying Monkey."

Sho-Nuff: Here I go.

Yas-Yas: This rhyme may have come all the way back from Africa.

Sho-Nuff: You'll hear that in the story.

Yas-Yas: We've done met men who heard this story half a century ago, and know it to be older than that.

Sho-Nuff: Sho'.

Yas-Yas: So go ahead and demonstrate it.

Sho-Nuff: Now?

Yas-Yas: Yas.

Sho-Nuff: You done talking about it?

Yas-Yas: Surely. Say it.

Sho-Nuff: I will.

Yas-Yas: Tell it.

Sho-Nuff: The lion and the monkey.

Yas-Yas: Teach it.

Sho-Nuff: The lion and the monkey
knocked at the sultan's door.
The lion he feared the sultan
But the monkey feared him more.
The sultan he was a cruel man,
And he demanded that they fight.
The lion he had sharp claws
But the monkey he could bite.
The sultan laughed to see such fun
As the lion he pounced
And the monkey he run.
"I ain't ever seen such a sight,"
The sultan testified,
But then the monkey stopped
And began to signify:
"O mister lion,"
The monkey did say,
"The sultan talked of your family
In such an evil way!
The things he said
Made my hair turn gray!"
The sultan saw
The two in the cage
Whispering secrets
And smoking gage
And the sultan flew
Into a terrible rage
And he seized his keys
And opened the cage.
"I ain't never seen such a sight!
Why is you whispering
When I said you should fight?"
And the lion did claw
And the monkey did bite
And the sultan he
Did die that night.
The lion he said
"Oh me, oh my
Watch out for that monkey

When he do signify!”

Yas-Yas: Ah-hah-hah-hah! Prisoners can go on like that for hours, telling stories or bragging about things what they done.

Sho-Nuff: Or making up wild stories.

Yas-Yas: Or inventing tales of what they want us to think they done. Here we was in the Douglas County Courthouse listening to some toasts we never heard before, so I asked a guard if he had a pencil and some paper so’s I could write this down. The guard gets me the writing utensils I requested and watches us with interest for twenty minutes or thereabouts, and then he says:

Sho-Nuff: “You boys pretty good at reading and writing?”

Yas-Yas: And I says, yas yas, we literate. And he says:

Sho-Nuff: “How would you like to get out of the cell for a stretch?”

Yas-Yas: And that’s how we ended up filing papers for the entire morning of September 28 on the first floor of the Douglas County Courthouse in a corner office with a window facing West and South. That office right there. Through the window of this office, we could see the terrible events what was about to transpire.

Sho-Nuff: Oh!

Yas-Yas: We was put in the County Treasure’s Office, where there was a dozen apple crates overflowing with all manner of papers, and we was told to set about organizing and filing. This meant we had to separate each paper into its appropriate file, alphabetized.

Sho-Nuff: By date.

Yas-Yas: And day.

Sho-Nuff: And month.

Yas-Yas: And zone.

Sho-Nuff: And last name.

Yas-Yas: And all manner of complex categories. Because it was Sunday and we was alone in the office we set to making piles of paper, what we spread all over the office. How many, would you say.

Sho-Nuff: Five hundred.

Yas-Yas: Well, less maybe.

Sho-Nuff: More maybe.

Yas-Yas: Maybe five hundred separate piles, and in six hours those very piles what we spread knee deep throughout the office would be doused with gasoline and set on fire. This makes us think all that work we did —

Sho-Nuff: It was an awful waste of our time.

Yas-Yas: Yas. It certainly wasn't no, uh, engrossing work. So we set to amusing ourselves by singing us a song from our act what is called "Furniture Man," and what goes:

Both: Now the furniture man
 Came to our house
 It was last Sunday morn
 He asked me
 Was my wife at home
 And I told him she'd long gone
 He backed the wagon
 Up to my door
 And took everything I had
 He carried it back to the furniture store
 And I swear I did feel sad.

Yas-Yas: Well, we looked up from singing this and there's about five Johnny Law standing in the doorway, eyes fixed on us, so we look down and return to our filing and our singing:

Both: What in the world
 Has anyone got
 Dealing with the furniture man?
 If you ain't got no dough
 Than you know fo' sho'
 He'll empty your house if he can
 He will take everything
 From an ugly old plant
 From a skillet to a frying pan
 If your bed ain't there
 And your house is bare
 It must have been the furniture man.

Yas-Yas: And we looks up again, and now there's about ten John Law in the doorway, and we're thinking that they are attracted to our fine singing.

Sho-Nuff: No, indeed.

Yas-Yas: No, indeed. We notice it ain't us they looking at, and it ain't us they listening to.

Sho-Nuff: They got their eyes fixed on the window behind us.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas. So we turn to look, and what do you think we see marching past the window?

Sho-Nuff: Little boys.

Yas-Yas: Yas, little boys, yas, some not older than ten, and there's near two hundred of them skipping and singing, and one of them is beating a drum. One of them is on a horse, and what do you think he's got around his saddle?

Sho-Nuff: A rope and a noose.

Yas-Yas: A rope, yas, yas. And a noose. And one of the John Law sees this and laughs and says:

Sho-Nuff: "Gentlemen, I see our lynch mob is here."

Yas-Yas: And four of them set out to the streets to converse with this brigade of little boys. Already a crowd is drawing close to hear, and the boys says to the law:

Sho-Nuff: "Agnes Lobeck graduated from our school."

Yas-Yas: And they say to the law:

Sho-Nuff: "Bring us out the Negro William Brown."

Yas-Yas: And they say:

Sho-Nuff: "We gonna hang him from his neck until he's dead."

Yas-Yas: And the crowd what was gathered laughed, and the law laughed with them. Then the police told the boys that in fifteen minutes they would commence to arresting. Some of the boys got to looking frightened and in fifteen minutes all but twenty were gone. But the boy on the horse stayed and raised his noose in the air, and told the law:

Sho-Nuff: "Arrest me if you must, but I ain't leaving until I see that nigger dead."

Yas-Yas: And the crowd what was gathered laughed, and the law laughed with them. One John Law broke from the crowd and came into the courthouse, and he made a telephone call.

Sho-Nuff: To the Central Police Station

Yas-Yas: Yas, and told them there would be no riot and there would be no lynching. And he sent home a squad of men what was stationed there as a precaution.

Sho-Nuff: Oh ho!

Yas-Yas: A dreadful error if ever a dreadful error was made.

Sho-Nuff: Dreadful.

Yas-Yas: This law what had been our harasser was makin' the exact motions that would turn him into our defender.

Sho-Nuff: Dreadful.

Yas-Yas: Because things around the courthouse was about to get a whole lot worse.

Sho-Nuff: A whole lot.

Yas-Yas: And by the end of that night that same John Law would be on that same telephone calling his wife to tell her that the building was burning and he was trapped inside and didn't no how he would get out. The mob, he would tell her, was shooting at anyone who showed their head. He was calling to tell his wife goodbye, and then he commenced to weeping in mortal terror while his wife listened and likewise wept.

Sho-Nuff: Oh!

Yas-Yas: But we ain't there in our narrative just yet.

Sho-Nuff: No?

Yas-Yas: No, we ain't. We still in the Treasure's office, we still filing, and we still watching through the window as a crowd gathers and this crowd swells.

Sho-Nuff: At two O'clock we git two hundred people outside.

Yas-Yas: At three O'clock we got six hundred.

Sho-Nuff: At four O'clock we git twenty five hundred.

Yas-Yas: By five O'clock in the post of the dang meridian the crowd swells out to five thousand people. Five thousand people. The streets are thick with them, they cover every exposed surface like molasses. Every time they see our black faces look out the window at them, they let up a roar.

Sho-Nuff: Five O'clock in the PM.

Yas-Yas: That's when they commenced to storming the Douglas County Courthouse.

Sho-Nuff: Five O'clock in the PM.

Yas-Yas: That's when they set it afire, trying to get at the man they hated, the man William Brown

Sho-Nuff: Five O'clock in the PM.

Yas-Yas: That's when they commenced the lynching.

THE LYNCHING

Yas-Yas: Now, I knows I've been talking for most of this time. My partner here ain't said but two words for every two hundred I say.

Sho-Nuff: Yas, yas.

Yas-Yas: That's the way he is, he was never much of one for making a lot of noise. But now we've reached the point in the telling of this gruesome tale where I gots to turn the floor over to him.

Sho-Nuff: Eh?

Yas-Yas: He done seen things what I didn't, and he's the only witness what can tell them.

Sho-Nuff: Oh?

Yas-Yas: At 5:15 PM the Johnny Laws began using clubs to shoo away the mob, who let up a yell of rage. They scrambled the ground for every rock and loose item they could find, to throw at the Law and to throw at the courthouse, and in the next five minutes every window in the building was shattered. You remember, don't you?

Sho-Nuff: Sho' I remember.

Yas-Yas: We was at a window watching when this happened, and the glass shattered around me, sending a cutting spray into my face. I was struck above my right eye by some blunt object what was crashing through the window, and I dropped to my knees. You say that.

Sho-Nuff: Sho', I seen you fall, your face red with blood.

Yas-Yas: I fell to my knees, clutching my head, feeling something warm and wet and sticky running down to my neck and wetting my shirt. And then I breathed hard, and I fell.

Sho-Nuff: You was unconscious.

Yas-Yas: Yas. So I can't tell y'all what happened next.

Sho-Nuff: You want me to tell it?

Yas-Yas: Yas, brother. Tell it.

Sho-Nuff: You want me to speak it?

Yas-Yas: I want you to teach it, brother. I want you to teach it.

Sho-Nuff: I suspect this here ad-hoc committee plans to arrest us.

Yas-Yas: Yas, I suspect the same.

Sho-Nuff: I been locked up enough.

Yas-Yas: I know it. I been locked up too.

Sho-Nuff: And still you want me to speak?

Yas-Yas: Yas.

Sho-Nuff: Even if we are condemned?

Yas-Yas: Either way we might be.

Sho-Nuff: Then why?

Yas-Yas: Ain't no one can tell it but us.

Sho-Nuff: No one?

Yas-Yas: Ain't no one can tell it right now but you.

Sho-Nuff: No one? I ain't never told no one yet.

Yas-Yas: I know.

Sho-Nuff: Not even you.

Yas-Yas: Tell it. Tell me what you done when you seen me fall.

Sho-Nuff: I carried you on my back.

Yas-Yas: Yas. You lifted me up and threw me across your shoulders.

Sho-Nuff: Yas, because the mob was rushing the door. There was about one hundred of them what kept running at the door, even though the John Law there would strike at them with their clubs.

Yas-Yas: These Johnny Laws, did they make any move to help you?

Sho-Nuff: Naw. I guess they figured they was helping enough. They had enough to worry about without rushing to assist no prisoner what was carrying around an unconscious body.

Yas-Yas: Where did you take me?

Sho-Nuff: Those elevators there.

Yas-Yas: Why?

Sho-Nuff: A law done told me to. He seen you on the floor, and shouted to me that if the mob got in they might go after us. He told me to take you to the second floor. Several laws rode up the elevator with us, and then fired their guns down the elevator shaft.

Yas-Yas: Why?

Sho-Nuff: It made a booming.

Yas-Yas: Like an explosion?

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff, to scare the mob. But they just gets angrier and rushes at the oak door at the front of the courthouse. A few of them take up a cannon.

Yas-Yas: A cannon?

Sho-Nuff: It was a memorial from the Civil War what was used as a lawn ornament, and it was small enough for two men to carry. So they used it to batter through the oak door. It splintered and fell inward, partially inward, and the mob let up a cheer.

Yas-Yas: You could see this?

Sho-Nuff: Yas.

Yas-Yas: How?

Sho-Nuff: Look above you.

Yas-Yas: Ah, because the second floor is like a balcony looking down over the first floor.

Sho-Nuff: This rotunda stretches up five flights.

Yas-Yas: You was looking over and seeing this?

Sho-Nuff: Sho'. I seen the mob trying to rush in through the broken door. There was a line of police right outside the door what were holding the mob back and shouting. And a man pushes his way through the mob, surrounded by a dozen laws. This was a man who stood there, wringing his hands and sweating copiously. He sweat, and wrang his hands, and sweat some more.

Yas-Yas: Not happy to be there, would you say?

Sho-Nuff: Right displeased.

Yas-Yas: Who was this man?

Sho-Nuff: He declared himself to be Marshal Eberstein, the Chief of Police.

Yas-Yas: Do you remember what he said?

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff. He gets to talking to some in the mob who are near the front, and are men what are dressed in suits and ties and top hats. They talk anxiously for a minute or two, and then the men in the suits raise their hands to calm down the mob. A quiet develops, and when it's quiet enough Marshal Eberstein opens his mouth and says thirty words.

Yas-Yas: Just thirty?

Sho-Nuff: Thirty exactly. He says: "Gentlemen, we must let justice take its course this day. I assure you that the Negro William Brown will go to trial and if found guilty will pay for his crime. . ."

Yas-Yas: And he says nothing else?

Sho-Nuff: Nah, on the word "crime" the mob lets up a holler, and some rush forward like they gonna beat him, and two John Law pull the chief through the smashed courthouse door so he don't get hisself killed. Other law line up in front of the door with their clubs held high, and they bring these clubs down upon the heads of anyone who pushed forward to enter the courthouse. The sound of the mob is terrible now, and there is sounds of screaming coming from outside.

Yas-Yas: Screaming?

Sho-Nuff: Yas. I go to the window to look out.

Yas-Yas: And you see the source of the screaming?

Sho-Nuff: Yas.

Yas-Yas: Can you tell us?

Sho-Nuff: Yas.

Yas-Yas: Tell it.

Sho-Nuff: I see the mob pulling colored folks from streetcars and beating them where they stand.

Yas-Yas: Oh.

Sho-Nuff: I see white folks trying to help those what are being beaten, and these white folks are likewise being beaten.

Yas-Yas: Oh!

Sho-Nuff: I see the mob breaking into stores and coming out with shotguns, and I see a girl about fifteen walking through the mob with a basket full of bricks.

Yas-Yas: Distributing them?

Sho-Nuff: Oh, yas. Handing them out to anyone who asks. And the mob sees my black face at the second floor window and lets fly with bricks. They crash around me, causing me to fall over backward, and as I fall I call out "They got shotguns!"

Yas-Yas: Does someone hear this?

Sho-Nuff: Oh, yas, *Everybody* hears it, and the Chief looks up and sees my face looking back down at him, calling out about the shotguns, and his face turns dark, and he raises his hand and points his finger at me. "Get that Negro out of here," he says, "before they kill all of us trying to get to him!"

Yas-Yas: Oh.

Sho-Nuff: I carry you up the stairs, and because I'm terrified I run up those stairs. When I reach the top, I set you down on the floor and close my eyes and lie down next to you.

Yas-Yas: For a short time?

Sho-Nuff: I don't know if I move for an hour. I jes' lie there, listening.

Yas-Yas: To what?

Sho-Nuff: Stones hitting the courthouse. Gunshots. Screams. One scream in particular.

Yas-Yas: What sort of scream.

Sho-Nuff: The scream of a man dying. I did not witness it, but I heard the gunshot and the choked sound of James Hiykel dying.

Yas-Yas: Who?

Sho-Nuff: I did not know Mr. Hiykel, but I heard he was a businessman.

Yas-Yas: A Negro businessman?

Sho-Nuff: No. Jes' an unlucky white man, I reckon. Like the Johnny Laws in the building, I don't know if he cared one way or another about the Negro William Brown.

Yas-Yas: Oh, sho'.

Sho-Nuff: But like the Johnny Laws in the building, James Hiykel found himself stuck in the middle of it all.

Yas-Yas: Did you see it?

Sho-Nuff: Nah. I was at the window, but what I saw was Sheriff Michael Clark. He have brought his deputies through the streets, swinging their clubs the entire way, beating the heads of any who stand in front of them. In this way, they knock a path through the mob to the courthouse. These deputies storm up the stairs and stop on the floor beneath me, forming a line of resistance on the fourth floor. I hear the noises, and I look over the balcony and down the rotunda to see if I can tell what's happening.

Yas-Yas: The police is on the floor below you?

Sho-Nuff: Yas, and the mob is in the courthouse on every floor below that.

Yas-Yas: Doing what?

Sho-Nuff: Taking gasoline and kerosene and pouring it all onto the piles of paper what we have been working on all morning. The mob is setting them to burning. The mob is tearing fixtures from the walls. The mob is taking knives to paintings. And some in the mob is dying.

Yas-Yas: Dying?

Sho-Nuff: Rushing at the Johnny Laws. A sixteen year old boy is shot in the stomach and dies where he stands.

Yas-Yas: You saw this?

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff I did. And I heard one of the Johnny Law comment on what a crime it was.

Yas-Yas: What?

Sho-Nuff: That white folks should kill each other over a wretched Negro. But he does not move from where he stands, gun in hand. And he does not move until eleven O'clock.

Yas-Yas: Eleven O'clock! Three hours!

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff, three hours what are nothing but shouting and screaming and gunshots and fire, and the smoke rapidly climbs the walls and the stairs and filling up the upper levers so that if you stand all the way up you can't breath or see.

Yas-Yas: And at eleven O'clock, what happens?

Sho-Nuff: The mayor happens. The mob opens out like waters parting. And through this mob comes the mayor, riding on a big black horse, Mr. mayor Ed P. Smith. He's got ten men on either side of him, and he's dressed in a black suit with a tall black hat on his head. He rides through this mob what has parted for him. He goes to the front of the courthouse.

Yas-Yas: Why?

Sho-Nuff: To speak to the mob.

Yas-Yas: What does he say?

Sho-Nuff: He don't say nothing. When he steps in front of the building, and I see at the window below me Law is crowding to see. And in each window below them to the ground there are members of the mob crowding to see what happens to the mayor.

Yas-Yas: What happens?

Sho-Nuff: The mayor steps forward and raises his hand. After three hours, silence fills the streets and fills the courthouse. And the mayor opens his mouth to speak, and a shot rings out. A man dressed as a soldier near the mayor clutches his stomach and drops to the ground, claiming, "He shot me! The mayor shot me!"

Yas-Yas: Oh! The mayor shot him?

Sho-Nuff: Someone shot him. He claimed it was the mayor, but the mayor didn't have no gun in his hand.

Yas-Yas: Oh!

Sho-Nuff: The mob don't like this none. A roar goes up. They swell toward the mayor, crying out with rage, and the mayor raises his fist to protect himself, but by then the mob has swelled around him. They grasp him and strike at him, and one from the mob beats his head with a baseball bat. The mob drags him through the streets and put a rope around his neck, meaning to hang him.

Yas-Yas: Pulling the mayor through the streets.

Sho-Nuff: Meaning to hang him. But some from the mob starts fighting, pulling the noose off the neck of their mayor. Every time they pull it off, another puts it back on. Some from the mob wrestle the mayor free and put him in a police car. They stand around the police car fight with their fists, striking at anyone who comes near. Others from the mob set on the mayor's defenders with baseball bats and topple over the police car. They drag the mayor out, pull him by his hair down the street, and hang him from a traffic signal tower.

Yas-Yas: You seen all this?

Sho-Nuff: Sho'. Oh, I seen it. I seen the smoke, and the shattered window, and the mayor hanging by his neck, and I seen you lying at my feet, groaning.

Yas-Yas: Moaning.

Sho-Nuff: Blood everywhere, clutching at your head, your head swollen up like a potato sack and your pupils wide and round.

Yas-Yas: Dilated.

Sho-Nuff: Dilated. You roll on your side and speak to me.

Yas-Yas: I remember. I asked if we gonna die that night.

Sho-Nuff: And I kneel next to you, and hold your head, and tell you I just seen the people of Omaha lynch their own mayor.

Yas-Yas: Oh. That's when I lift my voice up to Jesus, because when I hear they hanged their mayor I know they gonna hang anyone.

Sho-Nuff: Anyone.

Yas-Yas: And that anyone might be me. But the mayor did not die that night.

Sho-Nuff: No he did not. An automobile went through the mob, knocking people to the ground and driving over their legs. This automobile hit the signal tower, and four men spilled out of it. They took the noose off the mayor and drove him away to a hospital. There he lay for the next three day, until this Wednesday, almost dead. The papers say he woke now and then, crying out "They shall not have him! Mob rule will not prevail in Omaha." In his unconsciousness he was unaware that Brown was already long dead.

Yas-Yas: And with the mayor outside the window, hanging by the neck, those Johnny Law still in the courthouse started to make telephone calls to their wives to tell them goodbye, they was gonna die that night.

Sho-Nuff: Sho'. The sounds of gunshots and screams was now joined by the sounds of grown men weeping. The fire reached the third floor at this moment, and the some of the mob in the streets has by now taken to raising ladders to get at the fourth floor, trying to help the law get out of the courthouse. But others in the mob won't let no ladder stay up long enough to let a man live. There is those in the streets begging for the lives of the policemen, but they is met with laughter and cries of "Let them burn or let them bring us the nigger!"

Sho-Nuff: And in the streets, it don't seem like men what got murder in their hearts.

Yas-Yas: No?

Sho-Nuff: No. It seems like men what are at a State Fair or a parade. They all waving and laughing and greeting at each other, sayin', "How do you do tonight? How is your wife?" and then they pause and shoot their shotguns at a policeman what is trying to flee the courthouse. Then they laugh and talk about business. And they pat each other on the back. And they pour liquor from bottles and toast each other. And then they look at the courthouse, curious, because something it have exploded.

Yas-Yas: Yas, I remember. Something blowed up.

Sho-Nuff: Mason jars what they got stored in the stairway. These jars is filled with some kind of poison, and it spills onto the floor and fills the courthouse with poison fumes. We choke and we can't breath.

Yas-Yas: Some Laws start falling, coughing, their eyes rolled up in their heads. Others pull them by their arms, calling that we must go to the roof.

Sho-Nuff: So I pull you to your feet and drag you up the stairs, out onto the roof. And what do we see?

Yas-Yas: All the other prisoners.

Sho-Nuff: All one hundred and twenty one. They is crying, and screaming, and they gots in their hands the man of the hour. There is William Brown, four prisoner's hands clasping each of his arms, four prisoner's hands clasping each of his legs, prisoner's hands pulling his hair and prisoner's hands tearing his clothes from his body.

Yas-Yas: They drag William Brown to the side of the courthouse.

Sho-Nuff: Yas, trying to save their wretched hides by tossing him off the roof of the Courthouse. But Johnny Laws have a grasp on William Brown too, and they pulling the opposite way, to keep the man on the roof.

Yas-Yas: And to our side, there is female prisoners.

Sho-Nuff: They have gone mad with terror. The female prisoners is tearing their hair and pulling their clothes off, screaming and weeping and hoisting their feet in the air, because the tar on the roof is melting beneath our feet.

Yas-Yas: A terrible sight.

Sho-Nuff: The most terrible I seen. There is prisoners what are trying to push past us, to run down the stairs, and Johnny Laws holding them back by beating on them with clubs. William Brown, he is screaming loud and high, his scream carrying over the noises and filling the air like a storm warning: EEEEEEEEEEE.

Yas-Yas: And we gots the Sheriff right next to us.

Sho-Nuff: He standing by my side, watching this, his jaw working and his hands rubbing together, trying to figure out what to do. He's wringing his hands, he's sweating, wringing his hands and sweating. And he extends his wet hand and points a finger at the female prisoners, and he shouts "Move them out of here!" The female prisoners hear this and set to running, off the roof and down the stairs. When they reach the ground floor, several Johnny Law run them out into the street, all of them coughing and pressing their hands to their eyes. The mob sees them and sets on them, fists raised, making these women run a gauntlet.

Yas-Yas: Run a gauntlet.

Sho-Nuff: Yas. Run between men what are on either side of them, what are beating at them with fists and sticks and bats and the butts of shotguns.

Yas-Yas: It is a crowd what has gone mad.

Sho-Nuff: They ain't at a state fair no more.

Yas-Yas: They anxious to get at Brown now.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' they is. Some have taken the ladders and put them up the side of the courthouse, and they climb halfway up the building on them. Then they jump off the ladders and onto the building, and these men shimmy up the side of the building on window ledges and drain pipes. Some in the streets turn spotlights from cars onto the courthouse, so those what are climbing can be guided, and as the lights flash across them it is possible to see that they gots knives, they gots guns, they got nooses.

Yas-Yas: That's when I hear your voice.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff.

Yas-Yas: Singing.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff. I sho' was ascared then, and I commenced to singing.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas.

Sho-Nuff: Singing a prayer.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas.

Sho-Nuff: Praying for my soul.

Yas-Yas: Yas, yas.

Sho-Nuff: Singing:
 No more, my Lord
 No more, my Lord
 Lord, I'll never turn back no more.

I found him a resting place
 And He have made me glad.
 No more, my Lord,
 No more, my Lord,
 Lord, I'll never turn back no more.

Yas-Yas: And while you singing, some turn their heads to look. Those on the roof pause in what they doing, surprised to hear this sweet voice rising up in the midst of all this. And I know what I's hearing: a prayer for our souls. So I opens my mouth, and I sings for my soul too:
 Jesus, the Man I am looking for,
 Can you tell me where He's gone?
 No more, my Lord,
 No more, my Lord,
 Lord I'll never turn back no more.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff. I hear you singing with me, and I raise up my voice to holler even louder. Some men on the roof, what are long-time hardened criminals, they open their mouths to commence singing as well:

Both: Go down, go down, among the flower yard
And perhaps you may find him there.
No more, my Lord
No more, my Lord
Lord, I'll never turn back no more.

Yas-Yas: Yas, and just as we singing these words, there comes a cracking noise —

Sho-Nuff: What is the roof in the middle bending downwards from the heat and the weight.

Yas-Yas: Yas, and the Sheriff, he arrives at some sort of plan:

Sho-Nuff: What ain't no plan at all, really.

Yas-Yas: He shouts out:

Sho-Nuff: "We are going now, boys, we are all going out the front. Get ready to run."

Yas-Yas: And he nods, and we all commence to run together as a vast group down the stairs what are filled with thick, poison smoke. Some tumble down the stairs, some are stepped on, some double over vomiting.

Sho-Nuff: And coming up the stairs toward us is the sounds of the mob.

Yas-Yas: And we run and tumble toward them.

Sho-Nuff: While they run and tumble toward us.

Yas-Yas: We can hear them before us, some crying out from the pain of the heat and the smoke.

Sho-Nuff: Some crying out for joy.

Yas-Yas: Some gots hatchets in their hands, and they bang the hatchets against the railing as they climb the stairs.

Sho-Nuff: So that is what we hear coming toward us – screaming and clanking.

Yas-Yas: And suddenly the smoke opens out, and there is the mob, facing us. They stop they movement, and they stop their noises.

Sho-Nuff: And we stop our movement, and we stop our noises.

Yas-Yas: And for a terrible instant, there in the Douglas County Courthouse, we stand opposite each other, face to face, some men so close I could reach out and put my hand on their shoulder.

Sho-Nuff: And William Brown breaks the silence.

Yas-Yas: William Brown shrieks out behind us. And up he goes feet first over our heads to the waiting mob —

Sho-Nuff: Who let out a yell of joy and pull him away from us, down the stairs, and disappear into the smoke as quickly as they appeared.

Yas-Yas: We continue running down the stairs, prisoners pushing at each other and screaming, and we keep dropping to our knees or falling over backwards because the stairs are covered in shotgun shells and smashed wood and fire hoses what have been hacked to pieces by the mob.

Sho-Nuff: And when we reach the bottom of the stairs, we run for the smashed oak door, screaming from the heat of the fire what is all around us.

Yas-Yas: We come out into the mob, hands covering our heads, because we expect the mob will set on us like they did the women. But the mob ain't got no interest in us.

Sho-Nuff: They gots William Brown and they is all around him.

Yas-Yas: In the time it has taken to get down the stairs, they have killed him. He dead. He full of bullet holes, and stripped naked, and they have castrated his dead body.

Sho-Nuff: And they sticking knives into his dead body, and holding him still so they can shoot him with pistols.

Yas-Yas: And they put a rope around his dead neck.

Sho-Nuff: And as we run past we watch as they hoist him into the air.

Yas-Yas: And they all commence to firing upon his body what is hanging there.

Sho-Nuff: And with each shot it swings from the lamppost in and out of the light from the automobiles.

Yas-Yas: And then we reach the opposite side of the street and keep running.

Sho-Nuff: We kept running all night. We must have run ten miles.

Yas-Yas: We run until we couldn't run no more. Then we lay down in an alley and covered ourselves with cardboard, and prayed that this terrible night would end.

Sho-Nuff: But William Brown hung there long after we gone, and the mob cut him down and set him on fire.

Yas-Yas: They posed for photographs around his body holding bottles of whisky, like this was a holiday bonfire.

Sho-Nuff: When his body stopped burning, they gave it to a mob of children, what dragged it through the streets for several hours while the children danced and sang.

Yas-Yas: And here our story really ends.

WITNESSES

- Yas-Yas:** So there you have what you wanted. What is it we told you.
- Sho-Nuff:** I reckon if it's nothing else, it sho' is history.
- Yas-Yas:** History? Why, yas. History, yas. History from those what done seen it, and can tell it properly.
- Sho-Nuff:** Sho' nuff.
- Yas-Yas:** Arrest us if that's your will, or don't if that be your will. We used to it now, as we constantly seem to be mis-stepping and mistaking.
- Sho-Nuff:** Oh, that's the truth.
- Yas-Yas:** We done run from that courthouse that night. We was never charged with no crime, we was never taken before no jury, and we never pled no case.
- Sho-Nuff:** No.
- Yas-Yas:** And after the lynching, nobody seemed to care about us one way or the other. So we went back to our act.
- Sho-Nuff:** Until tonight.
- Yas-Yas:** When we gots ourselves pulled off the stage once again. Maybe we did commit a crime. There seem to be so many we don't know about. But if we committed a crime, we sho' nuff were not alone.
- Sho-Nuff:** No!
- Yas-Yas:** There was five thousand in those streets. Citizens of Omaha what was set to seeing somebody dead. There may have been some inside the courthouse what had the same intention.
- Sho-Nuff:** Maybe so.
- Yas-Yas:** We heard there was notes what were dropped off the side of the courthouse, reading:
- Sho-Nuff:** "Come to the fourth floor of building and we will hand Negro William Brown over to you."
- Yas-Yas:** And:

Sho-Nuff: "The judge say he will give up Negro Brown. There are 100 white prisoners on roof. Save them."

Yas-Yas: The judge?

Sho-Nuff: We did not see him.

Yas-Yas: No, we did not. Neither did we see these notes, and cannot tell you if they existed or not. Neither can we tell you who it was that gave up the Negro William Brown to the mob by passing him over our heads. There are some what say it was the prisoners.

Sho-Nuff: Maybe it was.

Yas-Yas: There are some what say it was the prison guards.

Sho-Nuff: Maybe it was.

Yas-Yas: There are some what say it was the black prisoners.

Sho-Nuff: Hm.

Yas-Yas: And there are some what say that it was us.

Sho-Nuff: Oh.

Yas-Yas: It don't seem to matter much one way or the other, as there was no way William Brown was going to leave the Douglas County Courthouse alive that night. Them was a mob what wasn't going to stop until they saw that black man lynched.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff.

Yas-Yas: We told you what we know.

Sho-Nuff: Told it.

Yas-Yas: We done told it.

Sho-Nuff: We teached it.

Yas-Yas: And maybe we ain't done telling it.

Sho-Nuff: Oh?

Yas-Yas: Maybe we gonna tell it a few more times.

Sho-Nuff: Oh?

Yas-Yas: We make our daily dollar by playing out tableaux of Negro life.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' we do.

Yas-Yas: Maybe we gonna add to it a tableau of Negro death.

Sho-Nuff: Oh! Is that what you think?

Yas-Yas: Ain't that what you think?

Sho-Nuff: I ain't thought about it.

Yas-Yas: Tomorrow, if you gentlemen allow, we will leave Omaha and take our act to Kansas City. But we take with us a story.

Sho-Nuff: We do know a story.

Yas-Yas: And maybe that story needs to be told.

Sho-Nuff: Maybe it do.

Yas-Yas: Maybe our minstrel act could use a bit of—

Sho-Nuff: Refashioning?

Yas-Yas: Re-fash-ioning. We witnesses to history.

Sho-Nuff: Sho' nuff.

Yas-Yas: We want that history told.

Sho-Nuff: Tell it.

Yas-Yas: And we want it told right.

Both: Sho' nuff.